

Today's debate is really one of priorities and fiscal discipline, not the estate tax. There is no question that the inheritance tax is badly in need of reform. Since I came to Congress, I have supported increasing the exemption, adjustments for inflation, modification of rates, and protections for closely-held and family businesses. That approach would gain the support of the vast majority of my colleagues, and would also offer more immediate and more reliable relief than a phased-in repeal that could be halted at the first sign of economic trouble.

By contrast, the bill the President vetoed contained much less than met the eye - and much less than those who own businesses, woodlots and farms deserve. Far from offering predictability, certainty and immediate relief, this proposal promised only a roll of the dice, continuing current inequities over a ten-year period and inviting future freezes and reversals.

More fundamentally, since I have been in Congress, I have been dismayed by our eagerness to act on the problems of those who need help the least, while ignoring those who need help the most. We have put the needs of children, senior citizens and working families of modest means on hold. For example, Congress has proposed repealing the "death tax" that affects a few hundred of America's wealthiest people, but has done nothing to address the "life tax" that affects the poorest of the 1.6 million people - 22 percent of America's elderly - in nursing homes. They cannot receive assistance with their nursing home costs, which run \$46,000 on average, unless they "spend down" their non-housing assets to less than \$2,000. This policy imposes financial hardship on the most vulnerable before they die - 300,000 people in 1998 alone - and in some cases exacts an extraordinary cruel emotional toll, as when long-married couples are counseled to seek divorce.

Congress has done nothing to help the 1/3 of our poorest senior citizens who have no prescription drug coverage and pay the highest drug prices in the world. Nor has Congress addressed the health insurance needs of 11 million uninsured children. A study by the Oregon Center for Public Policy found that, despite an extraordinarily strong economy, working Oregonians were basically no better off than they had been ten or 20 years ago. One in seven working families with children is poor, and one in nine faces hunger at some point during the year.

This is part of a huge tax reduction that makes it harder to meet our long-term priorities while ignoring the needs of most American families. I do not believe that anyone should ever have to sell a family business because a principal has died. Nor do I believe that elderly Americans should have to divorce their spouses in order to afford a nursing home, or that parents should

have to choose between providing food or health care for their children. If Congress acts responsibly, we can solve these problems. The President is correct in resisting a series of tax cuts that favor those who need help the least until there is equal attention to the plight of those who need our help the most.